

U.S. Reported to Weigh Open Aid If Nicaragua's Rebels Can Unify

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 1 — The Reagan Administration is exploring the possibility of encouraging Nicaraguan rebel groups to form an umbrella organization that could openly receive aid from the United States, according to a well-placed official on Capitol Hill.

The groups might meet soon, perhaps as early as this weekend in Miami, to discuss the idea, the official said.

The new political organization could resolve a problem that has been vexing the Administration since Congress voted last year to halt further distribution of covert aid to the Nicaraguan rebels. Congress did allocate \$14 million for the rebels in the current fiscal year, but said it could not be released unless Congress specifically voted to do so after the end of this month.

Many lawmakers from both parties have been warning the Administration that any effort to release the covert funds would be defeated. Some legislators, like Senator David F. Durenberger, Republican of Minnesota, who has just become chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, have been encouraging the Administration to come up with a plan under which Congress could openly finance the rebels.

"We've got two options," Mr. Durenberger said in an interview this week. "We can do it openly or do it covertly. The only difference is that when we do it covertly, we lie a lot."

Doubts About Open Aid

The idea of an umbrella organization uniting the rebel groups is apparently a response to the kind of argument advanced by Mr. Durenberger. But there is still considerable doubt, both on Capitol Hill and in the Administration, that open aid to the rebels would be legally or politically acceptable.

Senator Richard G. Lugar, Republi-

can of Indiana, the new chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, said last week that public aid to the rebels "would be very close to declaring war, and there's no consensus in the public for that."

Another lawmaker familiar with the idea of an umbrella organization warned that the Administration should not encourage its formation before reviewing the idea thoroughly on Capitol Hill.

"They'd better find out if anybody's willing to fund it before they give the groups too much encouragement," he said.

Senator Durenberger insists, however, that ways could be found to make open aid palatable to Congress. Speaking of recent conversations with Administration officials, he said: "When they say they can't do it openly, I come back and say, 'Find a way to do it.' I can't think of anything worse than covert aid."

There are two main guerrilla groups operating against the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua. One, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, is estimated to have 10,000 to 15,000 guerrillas under arms. The rival group, the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, has about 5,000 fighters.

Both groups had been receiving aid from the United States, through the Central Intelligence Agency, since 1981. Previous efforts by the agency to get the groups to unite have foundered on political and personal rivalries.

There have been published reports that despite the Congressional cutoff last fall, secret funds continue to flow to the groups through third countries, particularly Honduras. Administration officials deny the reports, but many lawmakers are skeptical of the denials and note that the rebels continue to operate.

Publicly, the Administration insists it will seek the release of the \$14 million in covert funds from Congress. President Reagan has been stressing the issue recently and, according to Senator Durenberger, White House officials seem convinced that Mr. Reagan will be able to sway public opinion.

But Mr. Durenberger says he is convinced that the President and his Administration are too optimistic. "I don't think he can pull it off," the intelligence committee chairman said. "He ought to be putting his effort into something sustainable."

The Minnesota Senator argued that any open aid to the rebels should be part of a package of tactics aimed at forcing the Sandinistas to open up the political process in Nicaragua and allow divergent voices to be heard.

One possible tactic, he said, would be to apply economic sanctions in various ways. For instance, he suggested, waterfront unions in this country could be encouraged to stop unloading bananas and other Nicaraguan produce until the Sandinistas allowed free labor union.